

Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews

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In the music of John Coltrane, it is often difficult to tell anger from serenity, a scream from a supplication, an infernal din from the dedicated pursuit of divinity—but these are not either/or dilemmas. One needn't decide that Coltrane is either in one mood or the other, for in Coltrane, anger and serenity are coexistent, supplications take the form of screams, and the pursuit of divinity arises out of battles with one's own demons. Coltrane's sound, one might say, is complex, multi-layered, even multi-directional; and yet it is also (and this is in keeping with its complexity) profoundly simple—direct. "To really realize something," said Coltrane in the mid-fifties, "you got to make it simple" (13-14). But the effort to simplify, it seems for Coltrane, was itself difficult, and not to be taken lightly. The attainment of simplicity required significant struggle.

In *Coltrane on Coltrane*, Chris DeVito has compiled over 50 interviews given by John Coltrane during his career. At times, Coltrane sounds like a man trying to explain himself to himself by way of a conversation with someone else; at other times, he sounds like he is trying to make clear to others, as simply as possible, just who he is and what he is trying to do; and at other times still he seems like he is trying to understand where he is taking the music, and where the music is taking him. Throughout, Coltrane is by turns speculative, diffident, evasive, curious, and unsure, and yet never lacking in confidence, never doubting the efficacy of the music itself.

Coltrane, of course, was much more confident speaking with a tenor saxophone than with his own voice when it came to "explaining" his music. The music, he felt, was not only capable of taking care of itself, but nothing else could take care of it. And yet he was both gracious towards and accommodating to interviewers throughout his career, even if frequently awkward and shy in their presence. One gets the feeling that Coltrane, even when he is sequestered in his hotel room with a writer with whom he has spoken on several previous occasions, is never fully comfortable giving interviews, as if he were usurping his own music.

Coltrane's voice in conversation, though, seems as layered and as honest as his sound on the saxophone, the former less a usurpation of the latter than a subdued—a highly subdued—mirroring of it, in the sense of both replication and reversal. If beneath the flurry of notes there lies a deep tranquility, then beneath the shy articulations, the frequent "ahs" and "ums," the professions of uncertainty, there lies a great sense of self-assurance. The French jazz critic J. C. Dargenpierre says that Coltrane, in conversation, "had an accent of sincerity which is not inclined to trick" (126). One can imagine that this accent both came from and reinforced his tone and style as a jazz musician. Barbara Gardner, in a 1962 *Down Beat* article, wrote that "an interview with Coltrane must be something like intruding into a human being's soul" (146). Indeed, many of the interviews in this collection often feel like intrusions, trespassings: in Coltrane's music his soul is freely on display, whereas in the interviews it is often somewhat prodded and needled, however benign the interviewer's intentions may seem. Coltrane, though, almost always remains patient with his interlocutors, even if he often seems, understandably, mildly put out at having to answer certain questions over and over again. Even when Coltrane takes umbrage at, say, the accusation, made by several critics, that the music he was playing in 1961 with Eric Dolphy didn't swing, he only becomes so piqued as to aver, "It's hard to answer a man who says it doesn't swing" (156).

Throughout *Coltrane on Coltrane*, DeVito keeps his transcriptions of interviews as literal as possible, leaving in all manner of stalls, backtrackings, lulls, and interruptions. The result of this is a clearer vision of the multi-layered nature of Coltrane's personality. Lewis Porter, in his biography of Coltrane, repeatedly brings up Coltrane's sense of humor (see pages 252-253, for instance), partly for the sake of accurate portrayal, but also partly in order to correct the misimpression that Coltrane (post-1957 Coltrane, anyway) was always serious, always focused on some distant ideal goal which did not permit indulgences of any sort. DeVito's compilation further humanizes Coltrane. Consider the following exchange between Coltrane and a group of Japanese interviewers, mediated by promoter Ennosuke Saito:

Saito: The gentleman [one of the journalists] apologizes that he has been repeating asking questions to you, alone, but now, as his final question, he wants to know, ah, what, or – and how, ah, you would like to be in, uh, ten or twenty years later. How you – you would like to be, well, in, uh, what kind of, uh, situation, you would like to, uh, um, establish.

Coltrane: As a, as a musician, or what, as a person? Or . . .

Saito: Um, let's say about – as a, as a person.

Coltrane: In music, or – as a person. . . I would like to be a saint. [*John laughs, then Alice laughs.*]

Saito: You would like to be a saint, huh?

Coltrane: [*laughs*] Definitely. (269-70)

All of the bracketed phrases in this excerpt are DeVito's. The interview took place in July of 1966 ("Alice" is Coltrane's second wife and pianist, Alice Coltrane), almost exactly one year before Coltrane's death in the same month of the following year. As a result of this coincidence, this particular exchange has acquired something like the status of lore, especially given that Coltrane was officially accepted as a saint of the African Orthodox Church in 1982.

As lore, Coltrane's remark "I would like to be a saint" is most often seen standing alone, presented as a confident and yet humble assertion. DeVito's literal transcription of the exchange, however, contextualizes it in such a way that additional interpretations are warranted. This needn't mean we must relinquish our belief that Coltrane was serious when he said this—far from it. But we might temper our belief with humor and humility in the same manner that Coltrane tempers the assertion itself. To begin, Saito's question seems somewhat lost in translation, strange and awkward. The questioner and/or the interpreter, in fact, don't seem to have a very clear question in mind, leading to understandable uncertainty and hesitation on Coltrane's part. Is this a question about work or about life? Saito says life, but Coltrane again repeats, almost as if to himself, "In music, or – as a person," as though it were not so easy to separate the two, as indeed for Coltrane it wasn't. His work was his life, as innumerable accounts testify. Finally, in a mood of what sounds like good humor, Coltrane says, "I would like to be a saint," and both he and Alice laugh. The somewhat strange question receives an equally strange answer, and humor lessens the tension that has perhaps built up as a result of two cultures encountering each other and not being able to make themselves perfectly clear: "–You would like to be a saint, huh? –Definitely." Here one can hear Coltrane's resonant chuckle and see the smiles on the faces of many of the reporters.

Make no mistake about it, though: Coltrane's joke was in earnest—he meant what he said. He wanted to be a force for good through his music, and he elevated his obligation to make people happy through song to a sort of divine duty. In 1962, he said,

I want to be able to bring something to people that feels like happiness. I would love to discover a process such that if I wanted it to rain, it would start raining. If one of my friends were sick, I would play a certain tune and he would get better; if he were broke, I would play another tune and immediately he would receive all the money he needed. But what those pieces are, and what way do you have to go to arrive at knowing them, I don't know. (182)

Saint, magi, shaman, sorcerer: Coltrane believed he could become these things, or something like them, through music. This is neither proud overestimation nor egotistical self-confidence on his part, but an unwavering confidence in the power of music and a humble self-awareness of his obligation, through his own talents, to develop and advance that power as far as he can, to touch and perhaps heal as many lives as possible by way of it.

Coltrane on Coltrane is a welcome volume in jazz scholarship, complementing the several biographies of Coltrane already in print. For the Coltrane enthusiast, it is no less essential reading than the biographies—more essential, perhaps.

Works Cited

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